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OPERATION ALLIED FORCE: LESSONS LEARNED FOR THE CONTEMPORARY ENVIRONMENT

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AIM

1. Air power is the main means of threat and defense that a nation has to impose its will or defend itself from aggression, this is due to its technological and doctrinal evolution has given the human being a lethal capability; and therefore it is used by a nation as power of dissuasion and destruction. In order to optimize their contribution to the achievement of operations, the essence of aerospace operational art lies in strategic thinking, planning, and the proper use of weapons systems. The aim of this service paper is analyze what happened during Operation ALLIED FORCE in Kosovo and obtain the lessons learned that will serve the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in future planning and execution of air operations.

INTRODUCTION

2. On March 24, 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began Operation ALLIED FORCE in Kosovo. It was a gradual aerial campaign that lasted seventy-eight days whose impact was adapted according to the obtained results. At the beginning of the operations they were limited to military objectives and then increased in intensity and expanded the objectives that included infrastructure facilities of both an economic and institutional nature. As Daniel Byman and Mathew Waxman have noted, “The air strikes and cruise-missile attacks were designed not to defeat the Serbian government, but to coerce Yugoslav President Slobodan

Milosevic to accept a political settlement.”¹ This service paper will analyze the different strategic and operational aspects that occurred during this operation.

DISCUSSION

3. At the beginning of the campaign, NATO decided to use in Serbia only Air Force resources with the intention of encouraging Milosevic’s government to end the ethnic cleansing campaign in Kosovo and the thought that a limited bombing campaign would facilitate the achievement of this goal to end Serbian action against the Albanian-Kosovar population. In recent years, leaders have employed air power, not solely as a joint operation with land forces but as a substitute for land power.

4. For President Bill Clinton the assumption was that a quick defeat of Milosevic’s regime was the central condition at the beginning of the air campaign, he specified three clear objectives: “To demonstrate the seriousness of NATO’s opposition to aggression and support for peace, to deter the Serbs from attacking helpless Kosovar Albanians, and to damage Serbia’s capacity to wage war against Kosovo diminishing its military capabilities.”² This clearly shows us how at the strategic level the objectives were clear and these should be transformed at the operational level as the final state desired by the political level.

¹ Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, “*Defeating US Coercion*”, (1999), 107

² Verbatim, Air Force Magazine, President Bill Clinton, “*Statement of Objectives*”, (1999), 106

5. Here began the difficulties for the operational level because the planning and execution of operations is realized in order to reach objectives set by the upper level, was mixed with the political objectives, because “Every target required the approval of every NATO country and reluctant participants severely restrained the numbers and types of targets hit during the first weeks of the air campaign.”³

6. Neutralize and degrade the army and the security structure of President Milosevic was the NATO Operational Command mission. The Alliance deployed in the theatre of operations more than 1000 aircraft of different Air Force, where the main contributor was the United States. NATO used a series of air bases located in European territory where deployed aircrafts were able to project from these bases the available air power.

7. One of these countries was Canada. For the personnel was easy to adapt to the operations due the great training and experience in exercises with other members of NATO. Operation ALLIED FORCE was “the first Canadian air combat mission in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Over the ensuing 78 days, the 18 Canadian CF 18s flew a total of 678 combat sorties and delivered 532 bombs.”⁴ Despite the training and experience of the personnel there were some limitations because the RCAF “did not have a war stock, and had not been able to clear other than the GBU-12 for use. Without significant investment, it must be stressed that Canada will not be able to repeat this performance,”⁵ and the lack of planning due to the number

³ Ellwood Hinman, Context and Theory: “*Lessons from Operation Allied Force*”, (2001), 28

⁴ Canadian Military Journal, Mission Ready: “*Canada’s Role in the Kosovo Air Campaign*”, (2000), 55

⁵ *Ibid*, 60

of aircraft deployed in relation “to the number of support personnel at a level commensurate with the increase in combat operations eventually had a negative effect on the health of men and women on the employment side with overwork the operation.”⁶

8. In Operation ALLIED FORCE at the strategic-operational level interface was that “political considerations required that Allied Force be controlled well above the JFACC level, by senior civilian leaders of nations comprising NATO and by Gen. Wesley Clark, the Army general in charge of the campaign.”⁷ Furthermore, “the most senior military leaders in the chain of command were all soldiers, not airmen.”⁸ Lt. Gen Michael Short, Allied Force’s Combined Force Air Component Commander (CFACC), “by his own admission, was relegated to the level of an executor, largely unable to influence the employment of NATO Air forces supposedly under his command.”⁹ As we can see from the highest level, they were unaware of the doctrinal of the use of air power, and it is difficult to explain how aerial conduct of operations was possible to be carried out by a person who did not have the sufficient experience and capacity to use air means. While Gen. Clark may have had the responsibility and authority, he clearly did not have the competence to conduct an air campaign. Despite this at the operational level, the commander of the theatre of operations had to accept from the political level a large number of political restrictions that greatly limited the freedom of action to achieve their proposed objectives. These limitations greatly affected the Air Component, which hindered its concept of employment and effectiveness, unnecessarily prolonging the conflict.

⁶ *Ibid*, 58

⁷ Ellwood Hinman, *Context and Theory: “Lessons from Operation Allied Force”*, (2001), 29

⁸ John Correll, *“Air Power and its Critics”*, (1999), 3

⁹ Stephen Aubin, *“Operation Allied Force”*, (1999), 11

9. The planning was carried out with considerations the highest level, as previously mentioned; the approval of the countries belonging to NATO was needed. For this, the use of precision guided munitions was considered, “but the targeting process in Operation ALLIED FORCE was both incoherent and inept, as well as hampered by political considerations that resulted in limitations being placed on both the scope and the intensity of the bombing.”¹⁰ The targeting process is a very important aspect of the planning process for the use of air power because it allows the Air Force to select and assign priority to objectives and take appropriate actions against them, taking into account operational requirements and available capacities.

10. Air strikes against targets in Kosovo were conducted under strict rules of engagement (ROE), part of which included the restriction “to avoid such losses, NATO consistently flew sorties at altitudes higher than 15,000 feet.”¹¹ To protect aircrafts from hostile ground fire and along with this restriction, the resulting effect was that “they were far less effective than they might have been at a lower altitude against most targets and virtually ineffective against the targets that really mattered, those associated with the ongoing ground operations.”¹² Here it is shown that they did not have the robustness ability to maintain effectiveness in a variety of tasks, situations and conditions.

¹⁰ Earl Tilford, “*Operation Allied Force and the Role of Air Power*”, (1999), 29

¹¹ Andrew Stigler, “*A Clear Victory for Air Power*”, (2002), 138

¹² Earl Tilford, “*Operation Allied Force and the Role of Air Power*”, (1999), 35

11. Phil Haun has observed, “to be politically sensitive and the politically more acceptable targets to attack were difficult to locate and identify.”¹³ Poor weather conditions and terrain features prevented reconnaissance aircraft from identifying units of Milosevic’s army. The location, identification, and damage assessment are the three most important and difficult aspects in the application of air power. This demonstrates that they did not have the flexibility to employ multiple forms of success and the ability to move smoothly between them.

12. “NATO strike aircraft averaged only 92 sorties per day for the first thirty days compared to a mass of 1,300 strike sorties flown every day during Operation Desert Storm.”¹⁴ Air power was never used decisively, and it was used at the end of the campaign in the face of the prolongation of the conflict. As Aubin concluded, “In terms of level of effort, it took NATO 30 days to do what Gen Norman Schwarzkopf and the coalition did in about three days of the Gulf War.”¹⁵ Unlike the Gulf War one of the fundamental reasons for the length of the campaign was the large number of restrictions that affected the use of air power in Operation ALLIED FORCE.

13. The air campaign had to imperatively satisfy the criteria of minimizing contributing nations own casualties, minimizing collateral damage, and avoiding serious damage to the infrastructure, but at the same time, stop the violence in progress as quickly as possible. Restrictions and conflicting interests of NATO countries prevented the available from intervening to result in quick military solution to the conflict in Kosovo. Had an appropriate

¹³ Phil Haun, “*Air and Space Power*”, (2003)

¹⁴ Stephen Aubin, “*Operation Allied Force*”, (1999), 6

¹⁵ *Ibid*

strategy been applied with the use of the massive coalition Air Force over Kosovo, it could have contributed to achieving the objectives set by President Clinton in for less time. From the beginning, the military had been politically restricted. One aspect that limited the effectiveness of air power was the process of selecting targets, which was reserved for the maximum level of political consideration, thus removing the freedom of action to the commander of the theatre of operations. Although the number of authorized targets to attack was eventually extended as the air campaign progressed, they did not permit obtaining decisive results since they were directed to the forces of the Serbian army.

14. All of the above may seem as though it was not a good campaign, but it actually was. Operation ALLIED FORCE was a campaign in which only air power was used; however it was not used in the most effective way. Although many declare as John Tirpak, the senior editor of *Air Force Magazine* that "for the first time in history, the application of air power alone forced the wholesale withdrawal of a military force from a piece of disputed real state."¹⁶ Or John Keegan, the defense editor of the *London Daily Telegraph* who said "this was a victory for air power".¹⁷ It cannot be denied that the use of technology was NATO's greatest capacity and especially the use of precision guided munition, "99.6 percent of the 23,000 bombs dropped over Yugoslavia hit their targets."¹⁸

¹⁶ John Tirpak, "*Lessons Learned and Re-learned*", (1999), 23

¹⁷ John Keegan, "*So the Bomber Got Through After All*", (1999), 28

¹⁸ Anthony Cordesman, "*The Lessons and Non-Lessons of the Air and Missile War in Kosovo*", (1999), 30

CONCLUSION

15. This service paper has shown air power is a very important instrument for the solution of a war conflict. In this campaign, air power was restricted by the political level that forced it to be used in a limited and gradual manner, without ever fully achieving the objectives that motivated the military intervention in the short term and without fully complying with its own characteristics and principles that characterize its use. It was only authorized to carry out a series of air strikes and wait to see if they were enough to change Serbian leader Milosevic' attitude.

16. This campaign was carried out with the exclusive use of air power, but the Serbian army did not have significant opposition on the ground. Therefore the analysis of this conflict identifies, the need and importance of joint military action without discarding any component (land, air or naval) prior to operations. If a nation or alliance decides to intervene militarily in a conflict, the Military Instrument must be used as a whole jointly, both decisively and quickly, to destroy the enemy's will to fight.

17. The strategic use of air power has its best application in the field of joint and combined action, the only possible form of performance of military forces in the 21st century, since it uses the capabilities of air, land and naval means for a more wide capacity for action in situations of crisis or conflict. It is evident that air power cannot perform tasks such as occupation of territory or control of the sea. At the same time, military surface operations are not conceived without a certain degree of air superiority, without close air support or without strategic and tactical air

transport. Hence the need for joint planning and balanced joint action. Acting together means that under a single direction each element executes the part of the mission that is assigned, and coordinated in time, place, and intensity by the supreme command.

18. This joint action does not consist of creating new structures or in joining the land, naval, and aerial in a single force with certain risk of losing the domain of the capacities and own forms of action, that to be effective, demand different mentalities, forms, organizations, and training. The logical thing is to get the most out of the existing structures, which in any case are indispensable. The supreme command will use in each operation the organs of command and control of the most capable force for the same, which will be supported by the others and will have the role assigned to it. This is the tendency that is being imposed, since it joins to its simplicity, efficiency, and practical sense a remarkable economy of resources, in particular of specialized, scarce and valuable personnel.

19. The commander of a theatre of operations that is designated to achieve the desired political end state must be able to exercise the campaign without excessive interference from the political level and must be selected according to their competence. In this way, they could carry out a complete utilization of the available forces, exploiting to the maximum capacity the assigned means. The chain of command must be simple to allow this commander and their subordinate commanders to plan and conduct operations quickly, and may increase the chances of success by virtue of the objectives achieved in previous attacks.

20. During war casualties to our own forces and collateral damage are inevitable to achieve the end state objectives, although steps can be taken to minimize them. The end state objective for this conflict was to stop the forced displacement and killing of Albanian-Kosovar civilians by the Serbian army. Therefore, these two factors should not be determinative in planning and conducting military operations in pursuit of an objective. Given in Operation ALLIED FORCE not a single aviator died in combat, it clearly decisively influenced in the future military action carried out by NATO.

21. In this campaign if not for all the factors that were detailed in the discussion of this service paper, despite that many of these factors were not the fault of the operational level, it was not as perfect as it could have been. One has to read so that everything from the past serves as learned lessons so as not to make the same mistakes. At the same time we must train ourselves to become a competitive and not fail at the moment that we have to command an operation.

RECOMMENDATION

22. RCAF should consider lessons learned from this campaign for the planning and execution of future air operations, and bear in mind that the characteristics of current and future wars ensure that not only the joint operation, but the balanced participation of the most suitable forces for each conjuncture, moment, and convenience are essential for success.

23. RCAF should consider the acquisition of material and technology that allows being in the standards of the other NATO members for future participation in combined or joint operations.

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